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UNDERSTANDING JUNIOR COLLEGE STUDENTS.

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ADMINISTRATORS WHO EXPECT TEACHERS TO HAVE A SYMPATHETIC ATTITUDE TOWARD THE JUNIOR COLLEGE STUDENT MUST PROVIDE MORE THAN THE USUAL TEXTBOOK DATA TO WORK FROM. TO UNDERSTAND A STUDENT'S PSYCHOLOGICAL AND ACADEMIC PROBLEMS, THE STAFF MUST BE AWARE OF CERTAIN INFLUENCES. THE STUDENT'S BACKGROUND IS OFTEN A LOWER WHITE- OR BLUE-COLLAR HOME, WITH NO ESTHETIC INTEREST AND LITTLE PRIVACY, WHERE PARENTS ARE CONSERVATIVE IN POLITICS BUT IN AWE OF AUTHORITY, MORE SYMPATHETIC TO INDUSTRY THAN TO THE PROFESSIONS, LIKELY TO BE PERSONALLY DISCONTENTED BUT TO BELIEVE GENERALLY IN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY, AND, ALTHOUGH LIVING MORE IN THE PRESENT THAN THE FUTURE, TO PREFER SECURITY TO SELF-EXPRESSION. THIS AMBIVALENCE DEPRESSES THE STUDENT'S EDUCATIONAL AMBITION, LIMITS HIS LANGUAGE SKILLS, AND CONSTRICTS HIS OVERALL SOCIAL CONCEPTS. HE THUS NEEDS GUIDANCE AND COUNSELING AND SUCH STUDENT ACTIVITIES AS WILL COUNTERACT THESE NEGATIVE PRESSURES AND STIMULATE INTELLIGENT DEVELOPMENT. MUCH CAN BE DONE BY HONEST APPRAISAL OF DEFICIENCIES, BY ATTENTION TO REMEDIAL ENGLISH AND STUDY HABITS, AND BY USE OF MATERIAL. PROFESSIONAL COUNSELORS AND TEACHERS TRAINED ON THE JOB ARE MOST LIKELY TO RECOGNIZE THE EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL IMMATURITY OF THE STUDENT AND TO DEVELOP AND CORRECT HIS OUTLOOK AS REQUIRED. THIS ARTICLE IS PUBLISHED IN "THE JOURNAL OF HIGHER EDUCATION," VOLUME 36, NUMBER 5, MAY 1965. (HH)

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Understanding Junior-College Students

Proposals for Meeting Their Special Needs

By Richard M. Bossone

IN DISCUSSING the qualifications for successful teaching in a junior college, Tyrus Hillway says that "a sympathetic attitude toward students of the junior college age group may very well be the most important personal characteristic necessary for success."[1] No doubt the majority of junior-college administrators would agree with this statement. But do teachers who should have this attitude understand what is meant by it? Instead of assuming that all teachers do, administrators who expect to avoid disillusionment, frustration, and despair when dealing with them would do well to explain it clearly.

Having a sympathetic attitude toward junior-college students implies, first, that the teacher has an understanding of their typical traits. Judging from the statements of administrators and from my own experience in supervising junior-college teachers, I would say that the majority of them have a very limited understanding of their students. This, of course, is often not so much the fault of the teachers as of leaders in the field who have failed to shed light on the subject. Aside from the usual statistics set forth in textbooks and articles about the student's age, sex, marital status, socio-economic background, and academic aptitude (most of which reveal that the average public junior-college student is eighteen years old, male, single, a member of the lower socio-economic groups, and somewhat inferior in academic aptitude to those who enter four-year colleges), very little seems to be known about him. Given such lifeless statistics, teachers have noted them casually as findings and have not fully understood the significance of them. What is needed, then, is more information and discussion on the implications of these statistics, in particular those dealing with socio-economic background. In order to get a better understanding of the psychological and academic problems of the majority of junior-college students, who come from what Burton R. Clark calls lower white-collar homes (of sales, clerical, and kindred workers) and blue-collar homes (of craftsmen, foremen, operatives, service workers, and laborers),[2] one must examine their milieu.

[1] *The American Two-Year College* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958), p. 189.

[2] See *The Open Door College: A Case Study* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc. 1960), pp. 51–61.

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Such students are likely to come from the wrong side of the tracks, where they live in a physical setting that is unaesthetic and offers little personal privacy. Their parents may be immigrants who tend to be less conservative politically than members of the upper and upper-middle classes, to be somewhat suspicious or fearful of authority, and to be more sympathetic to industrial than to professional groups. They are likely to be dissatisfied with their individual work, pay, and chances of getting ahead; yet generally, they believe that equal opportunities exist for all. Usually they live more in the present than in the future, and it is typical of them to manifest a greater desire for security than for the self-expression which the upper-middle class values.

In this milieu, which is not congenial to academic matters and educational ambitions, the student's limited command of the language skills basic to educational success is a serious handicap. In his insightful and provocative essay "Social Class and Linguistic Development," Basil Bernstein points out that the lower class employs a "public" language which is distinguished by short, ungrammatical sentences (or idiomatic phrases) that do not "facilitate the communication of ideas and relationships requiring a precise formulation."[3] Needless to say, experience in reading and writing is minimal, and the opportunity to acquire basic information and understanding of fundamental concepts is extremely limited.

NOW what do all of these findings imply for the staff and administration of the junior college? Let me designate a few of the more important implications they have in connection with the counseling services and the academic program. The problems they reveal may be interdependent, but basically they fall into two categories: the psychological and the academic.[4]

Those student problems we might designate as psychological generally stem from early environment and are reflected in insecurity, occupational and status anxiety, greater concern about the present than the future, and lack of certain social skills. These psychological problems point up the importance of counseling and guidance in the junior college and the need for close analysis and intelligent development of student activities.

Educators ought to make clear what kinds of counseling and guidance services are available. While it is true that the junior college has committed itself to the importance of counseling, in many instances it does not live up to the meaning of the word.[5] Administrators should clarify

[3] *Education, Economy, and Society*, edited by A. H. Halsey, Jean Floud, and C. Arnold Anderson (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1961), p. 298.

[4] The relation between class status and personality adjustment is definite. See Emil Heintz, "Adjustive Problems of Class Status," *Phi Delta Kappan*, XXX (April, 1949), pp. 290–93. The relation between class status and academic or linguistic ability is also definite. See Bernstein, *op. cit.*

[5] C. Gilbert Wrenn defines counseling as "a personal and dynamic relationship between two people who approach a mutually defined problem with mutual consideration . . . to the end that the younger, or less mature, or more troubled of the two is aided to a self-determined resolution of his problem." See *Student Personnel Work in College* (New York: Ronald Press, 1951), p. 59.

the counseling policy, objectives, and services to students, staff, and community. The counselors they employ should be professionally trained and should understand the problems of students who come from low socio-economic groups. Too often, counselors are merely program advisers who want a reduced teaching load. More in-service training and more frequent staff meetings should be planned to inform the faculty concerning their counseling responsibilities and to provide them with assistance when needed. Topics for discussion might center around the reasons for the tensions and anxieties of students and the means of alleviating them, as well as the problems involved in reconciling the institution's objectives with those of the student. It may be necessary to enlist medical and psychiatric help from community sources for seriously disturbed students, and to invite leaders in a number of occupations to discuss their work, so that students will have a better understanding of the knowledge and skills called for in the various pursuits in which they plan to engage. Since many students face financial problems and find it necessary to work while attending college, thorough pre-admission counseling needs to be instituted in order to help them reconcile financial needs with academic responsibilities.

More intensive and extensive research is called for regarding students' interests, attitudes, personality problems, patterns of class attendance, and academic progress. In accumulating information on these subjects, the junior college might do well to work closely with the local high schools. In addition, there should be a thorough analysis of student activities to determine in what ways they contribute to the student's attitudes and values. This might begin, for example, with a thorough study of campus publications. Moreover, activities should be developed which would give students a greater opportunity to learn social skills and become interested in cultural pursuits. Since students whose parents are in the lower socio-economic classes proverbially come from culturally deprived backgrounds, they have far less knowledge of the amenities of life than their opposite numbers in the four-year colleges. Finally, educational and extra-curricular programs should be regularly evaluated so that they may keep pace with the student's changing needs.

ONE of the major academic problems junior-college students face when they have the opportunity of attending what may seem to them a "Cinderella College" arises from their inability to cope with a situation in which language skills are demanded. Some of these students come from homes where broken English is spoken. For many of them, books have been replaced by television. They have probably not had to meet critical academic tests prior to this time but now are confronted with entrance examinations which require reading and writing skills they lack. As a result, they are placed on the remedial treadmill, and they begin what Burton Clark calls the hidden process of cooling-out: "In summary, the cooling-out process in higher education is one whereby

systematic discrepancy between aspiration and avenue is covered over and stress for the individual and the system is minimized."[6] In short, the student's hopes are let down gradually, gently, and peacefully, allowing the junior college to keep its cooling-out function hidden and its other functions highlighted.

But need this be the case? Would it not be better to face this problem honestly, understandingly, and openly, so that failure would not frequently follow persistent effort to succeed academically, so that students would not feel inferior, bewildered, and defenseless in a new and demanding linguistic environment? Educators in the junior college should determine the student's command of written and oral English and adjust the program accordingly.

In many cases, a full year of remedial English should be required. (I doubt seriously that a one-semester course would be adequate to give students all the help they need.) In-service training programs for teachers of remedial English should be conducted in which emphasis is placed on ridding the student of hostility toward language study, developing reading skills, and teaching transformational or generative grammar and expository writing. A specialist in the training of teachers of English should be called in to serve as a consultant in establishing in-service programs. Furthermore, reading and writing clinics should be organized. In the reading clinic, particular attention should be given to improving comprehension of various types of expository prose. No student can write clear expository prose unless he can read well. In the writing clinic, students should have an adequate opportunity for practice in composition and should receive expert advice about their writing problems.

In addition to linguistic tutoring and guidance, students need broader academic assistance in the form of counseling on the development of proper study habits and skills, especially note-taking and outlining. Moreover, they need encouragement to generalize from the knowledge gained in classwork and to relate this knowledge to other subjects and themselves. All teachers, regardless of subject-field, should emphasize these aspects of learning.

FINALLY, educators ought to engage in more experimentation with methods and materials. They might begin by varying the presentation of subject-matter in order to avoid boring their students: abandoning the exclusive use of long formal lectures, and, instead, alternating them with discussion and question-and-answer periods; using visual aids; and supplementing teaching and reading materials by a wide variety of illustrations. Also they might experiment with programed instruction if good programs are available in the subject-field. Many of the students under discussion are more likely to grasp the meaning of material when it is presented to them in the small step-by-step procedure of certain linear programs than when traditional teaching methods are used.

[6] "The 'Cooling-out' Function in Higher Education," Halsey *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 521.

These observations regarding public junior-college students are more important than they may seem at first glance. Teachers who have no understanding of students from the underprivileged social classes—their psychological and academic problems—are bound to be ineffective. When they are not prepared to cope with these problems, the inadequacies of the student are bound to bring out the inadequacies of the teacher. That this is often the case is confirmed by the administrator's perennial search for teachers with "a sympathetic attitude toward students." But empathy is a quality that is not inherent in the teacher. Rather it is developed by leaders in the field of teacher-training who believe that for the student, emotional readiness is a prerequisite of learning; and that for the teacher, emotional acceptance of the student is a prerequisite of good teaching. In short, it is more likely to be developed by educational leaders who believe it is dangerous to assume that the observations about public junior-college students set forth in this paper are what every junior-college teacher knows.